

# Uncovering an Indiana Treasure . . .

## Oscar C. McCulloch School No. 5



The Oscar C. McCulloch School No. 5 was built in 1922 near the current site of the Indiana State Museum. Using recreated and original terra cotta detailing and architectural features from the original School No. 5 building, a restoration of the school's façade graces the Grand Lobby of the Indiana State Museum.

Serving Indianapolis' most diverse ethnic neighborhood, the Oscar McCulloch School No. 5 was part school and part social services headquarters. The school was once a mix of Slovakian, Romanian, Greek, Lithuanian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Appalachian whites, Gypsies, Chinese and African-American students.

Personnel at School No. 5, striving to help students and their families become successful Americans, offered English and citizenship classes for immigrant adults and staffed Indianapolis' first educational facility for children with disabilities. The institution housed free dental and baby clinics as well as Indiana's first permanent mental health clinic. From 1930-1940, it served as the home of a free kindergarten.

Oscar C. McCulloch School No. 5 was one of Indianapolis' most elaborately decorated schools. The formal design and elaborate decoration of this school were intended to inspire the mostly poor immigrant families living in its district and to persuade them that education was the path to a better future. Designed by an Indianapolis architect, Robert Frost Daggett, the building was a flat-roofed, 3-story, H-shaped structure of brown brick anchored on a raised basement.

During the late 1940s, attendance at School No. 5 began to drop as first, industry and then, redevelopment took over the old immigrant neighborhood. After a decade as a school for mentally disabled and emotionally disturbed children, the building closed in 1978 when these students were mainstreamed into regular classes.

### **Who was Reverend Oscar McCulloch?**

1843 – 1891

Born in Fremont, Ohio

A social activist and the pastor of Indianapolis' Plymouth Congregational Church, Reverend Oscar McCulloch had a passion to serve the poor. While few social services were available in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Indiana, McCulloch founded or expanded over a dozen charitable and educational organizations. Institutions such as a free kindergarten, the city's first training school for nurses and an orphanage for boys addressed the needs of Indianapolis' children, the sick and the unemployed.

## How did the façade make its way into the museum?

The White River State Park Commission purchased the property where School No. 5 was located in 1980. Though nominated to the National Register of Historic Places because of its lavish terra cotta décor and its service to Indianapolis' immigrant community, the school was partially razed by the White River State Park Commission in 1985. The demolition was the culmination of a longstanding dispute over the park's inclusion and preservation of historic structures. Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana, spurred by former School No. 5 graduates, managed to save only a part of the building with a court injunction to halt demolition. However, by the time the injunction took place, the school's 45-foot by 85-foot front wall was all that remained.

In 1987, an agreement was struck between the park commission and Historic Landmarks that said that the school wall would be integrated into the museum's design. As a result, much of the beautiful terra cotta façade, including the original medallions representing learning and commerce, were saved. The bricks have been painstakingly recreated by Colonial Brick using a coal-fired beehive kiln. There is even an operational electronic school bell. The original was lost when the school was torn down, but a replacement was found and integrated into the design.

## What is behind the façade of School Number Five?

As children arrive on school buses, their first stop is in an orientation area just outside the façade. School groups also may participate in educational workshops in the multipurpose room that is located just behind the school's front doors. This way, the museum can continue the tradition of school children entering through School No. 5's front doors for learning and education.

### Additional Resource:

*Oscar C. McCulloch School No. 5.* Indiana State Museum, 2002.

[www.in.gov/ism/MuseumExhibits/school5.asp](http://www.in.gov/ism/MuseumExhibits/school5.asp)

McCullough, Michelle M. *A Fragment of the Past: A Case Study of the Salvaged Architectural Terra Cotta from the Oscar C. McCulloch School No. Five.* Muncie: Ball State University M.S. thesis, 1999.

Weeks, Genevieve C. *Oscar Carleton McCulloch: Preacher and Practitioner of Applied Christianity.* Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1976.